WORKSHOP ON THE CHURCHES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Sponsored by

The Taskforce on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility and
The Centre for the Study of Religion in Canada, Emmanuel College

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Victoria College
University of Toronto

OPENING

David Pfrimmer, Vice-chair of the Taskforce welcomed participants and outlined the purpose of the workshop. Nancy Cocks from the Canadian Council of Churches opened the day with prayer.

Panel #1: Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation

1. Justice and environment

Speaker: Tony Clarke, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

There are stark examples in the present Canadian situation of projects threatening both the eco-system and justice for marginalized peoples. We need a new framework to deal with such issues which would include certain propositions like:

- the importance of recognizing that we are on the verge of a global ecological disaster
- most environmental threats are inextricably related to peoples' movements and struggles for justice (both ecology and people threatened by destructive corporate and government practices)
- the driving threat behind much of this destruction is a techno-corporate ideal of mastery over nature
- new political and economic global forces are controlling events
- these new eco-justice realities reveal the depth of the crisis of western spirituality and theology

2. Peace and environment

Speaker: Ernie Regehr, Project Ploughshares

It is important for us to redefine "security" from military protection against foreign enemies to recognize the threats to our country posed by our own ecological destruction.

Environmental degradation can lead to political and military conflicts. Forty per cent of the world's population relies on

water sources shared by multiple states and threats to that water have already produced conflicts. Other examples can be drawn from Canadian fishing conflicts, global warming, Arctic resources, etc.

Military conflicts can not only be the result of environmental degradation but can also lead to such destruction. Toxic wastes from military activity are another source of ecological threat.

Our concept of peace and security will have now to incorporate a well-developed understanding of environmental protection. Sovereignty will need to be adjusted to both protect domestic social justice and allow for multi-national negotiation for global environmental sustainability.

3. Resources for a theology of the environment

Speaker: Nancy Cocks, Canadian Council of Churches

Scripture clearly identifies the wholeness of the eco-system as part of God's loved creation. Christian theology has often been held responsible for environmental degradation by its emphasis on humans having dominion over the earth. But a more profound examination of scripture points to other concepts.

- Yahweh is a God of relationship that binds together Godself, humanity and all the elements of creation;
- this relationship reflects a covenant of mutual inter-dependence based on love, peace and justice
- humanity is not pitted against the rest of nature in such a covenant, but is called to challenge any threats to the integrity of creation

Such theological understandings propel us to confession and commitments to new forms of living together in just and sustainable ways.

Discussion:

- "creation" entails a more profound understanding of the inter-relationships amongst God and the components of nature than does the term "environment".

- environment as a concept does include physical, social and political components.

- the decreasing east-west military tensions provide us with an opportunity to channel resources to environmental protection, but there is presently a lack of public imagination and systematic planning to move in that direction.

- political decisions could shift market demands more toward using resources for environmental protection, but there is also a resistance to governmental intervention in the market.

- other faith traditions can provide important insights regarding the integrity of creation.

- recent Canadian governmental soliciting of foreign investment particularly regarding forestry is posing a significant threat to the long term sustainability of Canada's forests.

Panel #2: Environment and International Development: Role of the Citizen and Role of the Churches

1. Environmental criteria for international financial institutions and multinational companies

Speaker: Peggy Hallward, Probe International

Canada is an active member of the international development banks (IDBs). These banks not only lend money but have considerable influence on the direction of development. Peoples' groups in the south ask Probe International for assistance in monitoring the impact of large-scale hydro-electric and other development projects and organizing to stop or modify IDB loans which threaten the livelihood of native peoples and the environment. Probe International supports the rights of people most affected by such projects to have a significant say in the nature of their development. Canadians are encouraged to advocate the rights of these peoples to Canadian corporations involved in such projects and to the federal government regarding the position Canada takes on loans being considered by the IDBs.

2. Human rights and conflicts: implications of environmental degradation

Speaker: Lee Holland, United Church of Canada

Environmental degradation is both a significant cause and consequence of military conflicts. Ethiopia represents possibly the classic example of the results of years of colonial exploitation, regional military conflicts and inadequate environmental protection with the disastrous impact on the areas's people.

Regional conflicts will increase as shared natural resources like water become threatened both by pollution and shortages. The root causes of both security and environmentally induced conflicts need to be addressed if adequate solutions are to be found.

The Canadian ecumenical community can participate in the UN-sponsored case study, Operation Lifeline Sudan, that seeks to find ways of supporting people's needs within conflictual situations. There will be more situations where nation states will have to re-examine their commitment to independent sovereignty if multi-state and global environmental threats are to be adequately dealt with. Canadians could make a positive contribution.

Discussion

- churches and environmental groups could play a useful role in promoting "solidarity rights".

- Canadian churches need to develop new approaches to regional conflicts; protection of the ecological integrity to support the population might be one possibility.

- IDBs used to maintain that they could not relate directly to indigenous groups affected by projects because that would infringe on the host country's sovereignty--more recently they appear to be recognizing that they cannot fund projects which will clearly impact negatively on such peoples.

- nations may be approaching a point of greater willingness to abandon some of their sovereignty in favour of protecting the environment.

- the public health movement domestically and internationally could be a significant ally to the churches in addressing environmental threats to the health of poor people.

- possible connections are developing between peoples' movements in Canada and in the south regarding environmental threats.

- churches have not had a particularly good history regarding environmental assessment of development projects that they support.

Panel #3: Environment and Energy: Church Research, Policy and Action

1. Nuclear energy

Speaker: Lynn McDonald, Anglican Church of Canada

Nuclear energy is heavily promoted by the nuclear industry and government as a safe, clean energy source and recently as a

solution to global warming. What is not described are the environmental, health and economic costs of the nuclear fuel cycle. Society still does not have proven safe disposal methods.

Energy efficiency and conservation would be a much safer and more economic approach to meeting energy needs.

Canada does not have a good history in the export of nuclear technology.

A campaign is developing to phase out further nuclear development and churches are being invited to participate.

2. Global warming and atmospheric pollution

Speaker: David Hallman, United Church of Canada

Global warming represents almost a metaphor of the destructive consequences of human industrial and consumer activity on the global environment. It also links the justice dimensions of north/south relations and the need to protect creation. Before countries like ours can criticize southern nations that are destroying the environment, we must take responsibility for cleaning up our own pollution. Industrialized, capitalist countries are responsible for about 60% of the accumulated greenhouse emissions that are leading to global warming.

Dealing with energy use is central to addressing global warming. Fossil fuel use in energy production, industrial activity and transportation must be reduced. Opting for nuclear energy is no answer since it would be too expensive and too slow a transition to have a major impact on reducing carbon dioxide emissions. An emphasis on energy conservation, efficiency and alternate renewable sources holds much more promise for helping us move to a sustainable energy approach.

3. Renewable energy and conservation

Speaker: Bob Geddes, Knox College student and TCCR volunteer

For the church, there are useful theological perspectives regarding responsible energy use. Many of the forms of renewable energy and conservation have almost no environmental impact in contrast to fossil fuel, nuclear and hydro-electric development.

There have been dramatic cut-backs in federal support for energy conservation, efficiency and renewable sources. Progress is still being made in research and development of alternative sources amongst Canadian companies. This research could be of use in the sharing of information on reducing greenhouse gases within the Canadian/European/US church covenant on global warming.

Cheap fossil fuel costs remain as one of the major impediments to developing alternative sources--the environmental costs of fossil fuels are not included in pricing them.

4. Impacts of continental energy policy

Speaker: Bill Luttrell, Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice

There is a long history of viewing energy resources in Canada as available to the continent, i.e. the US. A major aspect of this perspective is the high cost, environmentally-destructive, non-renewable exploitation of oil and gas deposits. Most of these projects are directed toward export and not domestic needs. They also destroy the lifestyle of northern native communities.

The Free Trade Agreement includes a provision to allow the US relatively unrestrained access to Canadian energy sources. The one possible limit in the FTA is the environmental criteria which could be used to challenge export-oriented energy projects. Churches could work with environmental groups to use this tool. Churches also need to challenge the underfunding of energy conservation, efficiency and renewable sources.

A focus on sustainable community is a key element in developing an alternate energy future.

Discussion

- there are conflicting opinions in society and the church about the appropriateness and safety factor of nuclear energy.
- alternative energy sources are becoming increasingly economically viable.
- the Canadian decision to pursue nuclear as a source of energy was taken in good conscience in the 1950's, in the belief that "atoms for peace" was possible.
- now in the light of more awareness and public opposition to nuclear, churches need to play a role in pressing for nuclear phase out.
- the conflicts in society and the church regarding nuclear fuel may similarly occur in relation to strategies to reduce fossil fuel use since that will have negative economic consequences on certain regions and sectors of Canadian society

- there is considerable potential for developing alliances between the scientific community and churches that will help move society toward the needed paradigm shift.

- churches and theological colleges need to provide much more reflection on a different relationship of humanity and the rest of creation.

- churches should be prepared to critique the sources in society that threaten movement toward a sustainable lifestyle.

Panel #4: <u>Environment and Native Peoples: Domestic and International Concerns</u>

1. <u>Native peoples and development in Brazil</u>

Speaker: Dan Gennarelli, Scarboro Foreign Mission Society

The initial explorations in the Amazon region inhabited by the Waimiri-Atroari began shortly after the Second World War. By the 1960's and 1970's, the Brazilian government under military control began opening up the region with roads to facilitate resource development. Already by the mid-1970's, there was evidence that the explorations were resulting in the extermination of over 2000 of the native people. Chemical spraying is believed to be one of the means used to destroy native people living in the area of the mineral deposits. A hydro-electric generating dam has been built to provide power not for rural electrification but for the export manufacturing zone in Manaus, 140 km southwest of Balbina. Its construction caused flooding of a large area of the native people's traditional lands. Meanwhile, impounded toxic waters discharged into the river has disrupted livelihood and caused health hazards to downstream communities.

This case study is appropriate for Canadian ecumenical action for various reasons including:

- the local people are organized

- there are significant Canadian multinational corporate links including Brascan

- international development banks are active in financing the hydro scheme

- Canadian partner churches in Brazil are calling for solidarity

- an ecumenical consensus exists in Canada

- NGO links are developing between Brazilian and Canadian groups

2. Native peoples and development in Canada

Speaker: Elaine Bishop, Aboriginal Rights Coalition

The first nations have much more potent language to describe their intricate relation to the land and the creator than do our western cultures. The relationship between first nations and environmentalists has not always been very harmonious in large part because of the history of white oppression. Environmental solutions imposed on first nations without their involvement can be as destructive as environmental degradation.

Canadian churches have adopted positions that there should be no resource development without the resolution of native land rights. Most of these resource development projects also have significant threats of environmental degradation.

The struggle of the Lubicon Lake Band in northern Alberta to maintain their lifestyle in the face of resource exploration/development includes many of the elements of social injustice and ecological degradation.

Discussion

- there have been conflicts between native peoples and the animal rights movement; native peoples contend that their long history of living with wildlife give them a relationship that needs to be respected

- there are approaches to some development, like forestry, that can be done in a way that both protects the integrity of the eco-system and the rights of indigenous peoples

- various first nations have proposed conservation-based development models which include the native peoples in the decision-making and ensures the sustainability of the earth

- there seems to be very little support amongst churches in local areas for native peoples' struggles which might threaten the economic livelihood of the white community; in some areas, churches have functioned to bring together the native peoples and the settler community

Panel #5: Advocacy with Government and Corporations

1. Reforming the environmental assessment review process

Speaker: Toby Vigod, Canadian Environmental Law Association

The concept of "sustainable development" as described by the Brundtland Report emphasizes the importance of incorporating environmental criteria and public participation before development projects are initiated.

In Canada, the Environmental Assessment Review Process (EARP) is one tool that is being used to challenge projects on the basis of doing adequate assessment of the possible ecological impacts and allowing public input. Several recent court cases where the EARP was used have been instrumental in the development of environmental law in Canada.

The EARP has been reviewed over the past several years. Proposals to improve EARP are being opposed by strong economic interests in the government and reforms are thus presently stalled.

Churches and environmental NGOs have in the past and need to work further together on issues related to the environmental assessment review process.

2. Corporate campaigns: the role of codes of environmental practice

Speaker: Moira Hutchinson, Taskforce on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility

TCCR often begins dialogue with corporations by asking the companies to state their own policy in relation to a specific issue--eg. forestry practices. This process provides an opportunity for peoples most affected by development projects to gain information they need to press companies to function more responsibly. TCCR also used other strategies like shareholder action, investor and consumer screening, etc.

Recent movements toward ethical investing and ethical consumption are encouraging, but can also mask the need for more fundamental critiques of societal patterns based on mass consumption. TCCR encourages people concerned about environmentally-responsible consuming:
- to be public about the need for companies to change
- to recognize that there is no such thing as pure/clean companies
- to consider the options to present consumption patterns

Discussion

- crown corporations have been, in TCCR's experience, more difficult for dialogue than publicly-held private corporations

- the Ontario government has recently taken a major step backward by emphasizing recycling of pop cans and allowing the industry to reduce its use of returnable bottles which are more environmentally-friendly

- the class environmental assessment of forest management in Ontario has been very problematic, but is an important instrument to raise forestry issues

- constructive restructuring steps regarding environmentally-sensitive corporate activity could include criteria like more community-based ownership and keeping production close to markets to reduce transportation needs

- there is an important challenge for churches to educate their constituencies to assume environmentally-responsible lifestyles to accompany the more systemic advocacy with corporations and government

Panel #6: Working with Congregations, Ecumenical Networks, and Other Environmental Groups

1. Perspective of an environmentally concerned member of a congregation

Speaker: Pat Hartig, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

There are mixed signals about the level of congregational concern about environmental issues. Many are recognizing the faith dimensions to environmental awareness and can do much to relate to and support environmental movements in the community. The churches should seriously consider establishing a national environmental ecumenical coalition to assist congregations.

Resources for churches are available from a variety of sources:
- national denominational offices
- North American Conference on Theology and Ecology
- UN Environmental Sabbath Programme

2. An environmental group's view of the role of churches

Speaker: Janine Ferretti, Pollution Probe

There have been significant developments since the first Earth Day. What is needed beyond fear of ecological disaster is a fundamental shift in values. The churches can be important

instruments in this shift, helping to weave environmental concerns into basic social values. There are some important developments occurring in churches, but it needs to be more broadly based in local congregations.

Environmentalists critique the traditional dualistic western mentality that has often had Christian theological articulation. Though environmentalists seek to form alliances with social justice groups like churches, in terms of public policy advocacy, there is concern about whether churches will remain tied to this concept of humans having dominion over creation. It is important that opportunities be provided for dialogue to facilitate a sharing of value perspectives and building stronger alliances amongst churches and environmental groups.

3. <u>The role of a national church organization in relation to congregations and environmental groups</u>

Speaker: Ray Hodgson, Presbyterian Church in Canada

A national church organization must both reflect and stimulate policy development on environmental issues within its church. Such policies need to have an impact on all levels of the institution. This is facilitated when they include educational strategies and practical suggestions for action. Resources from various sources could be used--there could be useful sharing of educational resources amongst churches and environmental groups. With some attention to the broader audiences, resources could be developed by one group and then be usable by a wider network.

National church organizations can help local congregations become involved in public advocacy situations. This is another area where co-operation amongst churches and environmental groups could be very effective.

<u>Reports from Discussion Groups</u>

a) - local church environmental awareness must include both personal lifestyle responsibility and also a longer term ethical/theological attitude change that leads to more systemic changes

- more productive to involve already existing congregational groups rather than setting up new groups

b) - discussed the difference between "creation" and "environment"
- youth providing considerable leadership on environmental issues
- there is a unique role that the Christian church can play within the environmental movement
- that contribution can be largely spiritual/theological

which articulates a profound understanding of the nature of "creation"
- we must be prepared to repent of our destructive patterns of behaviour

c)
- a gap exists between gatherings such as this workshop and the perspective of congregations
- national churches, coalitions, resources often make assumptions of where people are conceptually which may not be well founded
- resources should take more into account the audiences for which they are designed

d)
- what is missing so far today is a strong feminist articulation of the nature of creation and the inter-relationship of God, humanity and all of nature
- some of the writings of feminist theologians can provide very helpful insights to assist us in a paradigm shift which could lead to changed social values and human behaviours

e)
- focussed on the role of the church in helping to formulate appropriate values
- to affirm creation, the church must accept the role of being counter cultural--no place for a tame religion; in so doing, we need to evangelize our own people to follow the pastoral example of Jesus who challenged all, but rejected none

f)
- in order to avoid some of the social conflicts resulting from over-development and environmental degradation, churches might seek to stimulate the development of an ecologically responsible and socially progressive planning framework in which municipalities could function
- this process could be informed by values articulated by churches

CLOSING

Roger Hutchinson on behalf of the Centre for the Study of Religion in Canada thanked participants for their involvement and dismissed the gathering with a benediction.